

Ethical Dimensions of the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* and Its Influence on Gandhiji's Thoughts

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ABSTRACT

The *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* is the most influential work on Indian culture, religion and ethics. It offers the essential guidance and profound wisdom not just for the Indian community, but for all the mankind. Mahatma Gandhi is a man of principle. He is profoundly influenced by the ideology of the *Gita*. He follows the principles of morality revealed in the *Gita*. The ethical concepts such as- *ahimsā*, *satya*, *brahmacarya* etc. are well-explained by Lord Kṛṣṇa in the *Gita*. However, these concepts are reflected in Gandhiji's thought also. Influenced by the teachings of the *Gita*, Gandhiji admits that non-violence is the principle of *dharma*. From, this point of view, it may be said that Gandhiji maintains the moral standards in his life. Therefore, in this paper, influence of ethical ideology of the *Gita* in Gandhiji's thought would be endeavored to elaborate.

Keywords: *ahimsā*, *satya*, *brahmacarya*, *dharma*

Introduction:

The *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* (hereafter *Gita*) is the most influential scripture in the entire Universe. It holds the immense significance in Indian culture, religion and ethics. The full form of the *Gita* is *Śrīmadbhagavadgītāpaniṣad*. This holy text is taken from *bhīṣmaparva* of the *Mahābhārata*. There are significant dialogues between Lord Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. When Arjuna becomes sorrowful by seeing his close relatives, Gurus and all in the battle-field, then the charioteer Kṛṣṇa starts to give advice to arjuna and those thoughtful, divine advises are named as the great *Gita*. The *Gita* is the storehouse of all types of knowledge, which is divided into eighteen chapters. The divine sage Vedavyāsa says in the *Mahābhārata*, that the *Gita* alone should be sung, heard, recited, studied, taught, pondered and assimilated properly. So, there is no need of collecting other scriptures. The *Gita* emerges directly from the lotus like lips of God Viṣṇu himself.¹

As the incarnation of God, Kṛṣṇa offers essential guidance and profound wisdom to the Indian community. He asserts that one can attain union with God and evade karmic debt by adhering to ethical and religious principles. These principles emphasize self-renunciation, selfless actions towards others and God. Also, he says that meditation is one of the means to acquire divinity and perfection. These ethical conducts have impacted several contemporary Indian philosophers also. Among them, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi etc. are well-known. In this paper, influence of the *Gita* in Gandhi's thought will be discussed. Gandhiji was a man of principle. He profoundly followed the ideology of the *Gita* in his life. Since childhood, he came contact with the *Gita*. But later he acquainted to the *Gita* to great extent. Hence, he is inspired by the utmost ideology of the *Gita* and reflects the values of the *Gita* in his personal and social life. Thus, practical idealism is immensely seen in Gandhiji's thought. It is noticed that in his thought moral value and principles lead in order to achieve better society. For that purpose, path of action is predominantly prioritized by him.

Methodology

This paper has been applied both analytical and descriptive methodology. This paper is primarily based on the original work the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* and a few works of Mahatma Gandhi. This paper applies endnote for further references. In some places, for the word Sanskrit origin, diacritical marks are used. Books names are italicized.

Objectives

The main objectives of this paper are to search:

- The concept of ethics
- The ethical values as reflected in the *Gita*
- Influence of ethics of the *Gita* in Gandhiji's thoughts

Concept of Ethics

Ethics focuses on the spiritual development of every individual. The spiritual act includes performance of ordinary duties from the higher perspective. This spiritual growth involves attaining divine consciousness. Through the realization of divinity, one understands the ultimate reality of the Universe. Ethics takes vital position in understanding the divinity of the Universe. It can be said that ethical foundation is the root of every faith. Ethical principles have their origins in ancient times. The notable saying 'non-violence is the great virtue' is taken from the epic *Mahābhārata*.ⁱⁱ In the *Muṇḍakopaniṣad*, it is said that the pure soul within the body can be reached by truthfulness, penance, by sound knowledge and abstinence from sensual pleasure.ⁱⁱⁱ Also, the remarkable assertion 'truthfulness wins' has also been taken from the *Muṇḍakopaniṣad*.^{iv} If it is seen to philosophy of Buddhism there is found *aṣṭāṅgika mārga*, i.e., eightfold path such as- right view, right motive, right speech, right action, right livelihood and right effort, right recollection and right concentration. In Jainism also, there is found *triratna*, i.e., three jewels, those are- right faith, right knowledge and right conduct.^v Similarly, Yoga philosophy discusses the *aṣṭāṅgayoga*, i.e., eight limbs of *yoga*, viz., abstention, observance, posture, regulation of breath, withdrawal of the senses, attention, meditation and concentration. In abstention, there is included five kinds of morality, i.e., non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, control of sense-organs and non-acceptance. Again, in observance, there consists of five good habits, i.e., purification of body and mind, contentment, penance, study of religious scriptures and devotion to God.^{vi} It is not possible to discuss each scripture, which guides about the ethos, values and integrity. But it may be said that, almost each and every ancient scripture serves the guidance of morality. Among them, the *Gita* is one of the valuable resources for understanding the moral principles. It is considered as the scripture of ethical values. Therefore, ethical values as found in the *Gita* is endeavored to discuss here.

Ethical values as reflected in the *Gita*

The *Gita* is the epitome of moral values. Since, ethical actions lead to positive outcomes and unethical actions lead to negative consequences. So, it is seen in the *Gita* that it emphasizes on this matter. The *Gita* teaches the principle of *karma*, i.e., duty, which is the idea that one's actions have consequences. However, it gives the importance to the selfless duty where individuals perform their duties without desiring the consequence of *karma*. Therefore, one should perform their duties altruistically. However, duties can vary in nature, being either good or bad. For a robber, robbery is considered a duty. But is it ethical? Certainly not. The *Gita* teaches universal moral principles such as non-stealing, truthfulness, nonviolence, cleanliness, austerity and so on. It never advocates for performing unethical duties. Lord Kṛṣṇa himself states that wisdom, knowledge, free from doubt, forgiveness, truthfulness, control of the senses and mind, happiness and sorrow, birth, death, fear, courage, non-violence, equanimity, contentment, penance, charity, fame and infamy- all these varieties are created by Lord Kṛṣṇa.^{vii} According to Kṛṣṇa, these types of transcendental qualities belong to righteous men endowed with divine nature.^{viii} These qualities are interconnected. Truthfulness is not only speaking truth to please someone. Sometimes truth may be unpleasant, but to live ethically, one should not refrain from speaking it. Controlling the senses from worldly objects make a person firm. Senses should not be used for temporary personal enjoyment. Similarly, mind also should not be used for unnecessary thoughts. Because, the world is temporary and full of misery. Therefore, everyone should engage in service to Lord Kṛṣṇa.^{ix} The non-violence signifies that one should not act anything which will put others into misery. Swami Praphupāda mentions that non-violence implies that individuals should be educated to fully bind the potential of the human body. The purpose of the human body is spiritual enlightenment, so any actions or activities that do not support violence on the human body. Actions that promote the future spiritual well-being of people are considered non-violent.^x In this way, it can be said that the *Gita* serves an unending guidance for ethical living. It offers how one can live a life of integrity, responsibility and moral clarity. It is seen that Mahatma Gandhi is impacted by the several ethical concepts of the *Gita*, such as- truthfulness, non-violence, *brahmacharya*, i.e., controlling the sense-organs, mind and so on. Therefore, now, the influence of ethics in Gandhi's thoughts would be endeavored to discuss here.

The Ethical Core of Gandhi's Thoughts

Gandhiji's thoughts are deeply ethical. As Gandhiji is much influenced by the *Gita*, he believes that every

individual has full potentiality to shift the degraded society into virtuous. Every individual possesses inherent values like goodness, dignity etc. Hence, Gandhiji's thought humanism is highlighted prominently. The foundation of these principle is mostly based on the key ethical norms viz., truth, non-violence and *brahmacharya*. Dev Raj Bali opines that three cardinal values viz., truth and non-violence and *brahmacharya* has made to Gandhiji as religious person.^{xi} Gandhiji uses these mottoes that the society and man can be changed in wider sense.

The truth is considered as positive value. He understood truth as celestial quality. According to Gandhiji, the concept of truth is meant to God. He is the *sat*. The meaning of *sat* is everlasting, eternal. The *Chāndogyaopaniṣad* says that *sat* is the only one and non-dual reality.^{xii} Lord Kṛṣṇa also states in the *Gita* that the auspicious word *sat* signifies eternal existence and goodness. In the performance of sacrifice, austerity and charity also, the word *sat* is used.^{xiii} Therefore, it may be said that God is truth and it can be realized just by self-realization. And self-realization leads to attain *mokṣa* i.e., liberation. Liberation is the ultimate truth and final aim of human life. Gandhiji in his autobiography under the title *My Experiment with Truth* is the reflection of self-realization. About the self-realization he has mentioned that, "What I have been striving and pinning to achieve these thirty years- is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain moksha."^{xiv} Therefore, truth is the only one reality that through which individual can know and realize the self. This is the base and source point of the strategy or method that he applied in Indian struggle movement. The methods viz., *satyāgraha*, *sarvodaya*, *svadeśī*, *svarāj*. The concept of *satyāgraha* refers that the term *satya* means truth and *āgraha* means adherence. This implies to the truth force. This is a firm method towards truth and right. The concept of *sarvodaya* refers to uplift of all. This concept opens social justice and equal right for all without having discrimination. Gandhiji believed every individual has inherent potentiality. For that, Gandhiji endeavors selflessly to reform of various superstition from society i.e., racial discrimination in society. In order to that Gandhiji tried to remove social barrier among Harijan and Non-Harijan. He borrows the concept of equality from the *Gita* in regards of cast, creed, gender etc. The *Gita* says every individual will able to attain liberation whether it is women, sinner, *śūdra* etc., if they become devotee of God.^{xv} Gandhiji wanted to establish equality to create a social order in order to class-less and cast-less society. The concept *svadeśī* makes individual self-reliant. This is self-sufficiency to use indigenous products in order to empower the local community. *Svadeśī* reminds not to forget originality. The concept of *svarāj* is meant to self-ruled not under bondage senses. He says that *svarāj* must have win from slavery of senses because, for the *ātman*, *svarāj* has to attain.^{xvi} All these are the techniques or methods in which ethical values has been included. Gandhiji applied these ethical principles in Indian struggle movement for independence of India.

The non-violence is one of the highest moral principles of Gandhian thought. The concept of non-violence i.e., *ahimsā* i.e., avoidance of violence has been scattered in spiritual tradition like Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. Gandhi adopted the principle of non-violence in his entire life. Hence, he wants to achieve the Indian freedom under British rule by applying the strategy of non-violence. Non-violence i.e., non-injurious behavior is meant by thought, word and action which should be avoided. Thereby universal love, sympathy, kindness etc. are spontaneously flourished. He understands the *Gita* as non-violence is the principle of *dharma*.^{xvii} The *Gita* lay emphasizes on these ethical values. Gandhiji forwarded footstep by abiding the teaching of the *Gita*. Gandhiji confessed that before realizing the secret meaning of non-violence, he used to continue the habit of eating meat. By the principle of non-violence Gandhiji says that non-violence is not killing any creatures for eating rather not killing even poisonous creature.^{xviii} When the concept of *dharma* come there must come non-violence. Hence, it is the principle of *dharma* which is the essence of the *Gita*. To Gandhi, there is only one *dharma* i.e., non-violence. Non-violence can lead to *mokṣa*. *Mokṣa* is in the sense of realization of Supreme Reality.^{xix}

The *brahmacharya* refers to celibacy. This is a kind of vow in monastic tradition like Hindu, Jaina and Buddha. To Gandhi, observance of celibacy means the realization of *Brahman* i.e., Supreme Reality.^{xx} He mentions in his autobiography that, "I realized that a vow, far from closing the door to real freedom, opens it."^{xxi} Apart from that, *brahmacharya* also implies self-control. This may have called self-discipline. Control over sense organs of the body. Gandhiji himself confess that he controlled over his tongue. For that he observed fasting. According to him *brahmacharya* refers to control of senses over thought word and action and for that renunciation is necessary.^{xxii} The purpose of *brahmacharya* is restraint. Restrain brings tranquility in restless mind. Whenever mind becomes quite victory over senses is easier.

Gandhiji advocates the *karmayoga* i.e., path of action of the *Gita*. To perform or engage in deeds the veracity and avoidance of violence must be applied. There are three kinds of action viz., mental, verbal and physical. Gandhiji maintains all three actions should be non-violent. In order to that he strictly followed these principles in socio-

political field. The *Gita* presents *niṣkāmakarma* i.e., selfless deeds to be performed one's action. Thus, to change into better society Gandhiji pay importance on realization of truth and adopt non-violence.

Conclusion

Concluding this paper, it can be summarized that truth and non-violence though apparently seem differ, but both are complementary each other. And *brahamacarya* assists to achieve truth and non-violence easily because through *brahamacarya* self-restrain is possible. To know the reality, it needs the principle of non-violence. Thus, Gandhiji says truth cannot be realized without non-violence.^{xxiii} Apart from that Gandhi says that, "Truth is its own proof, and non-violence is its supreme fruit."^{xxiv} The non-violence is necessarily contained in the former. Therefore, these ethical values are as the guiding principle of Gandhiji's life that leads transformative change and made him extraordinary human for which he is called *mahātma* i.e., the 'Great Soul'. So, in this regard, it can be said that Gandhiji is deeply influenced by the ethical principles and integrity of the *Gita*, Upaniṣads and other Indian philosophical systems like- Bauddha, Jaina, Yoga and so on.

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- ⁱ gītā sugītā kartavyā kimanyaiḥ śāstrasamgrahaiḥ/
yā svayaṁ padmanābhasya mukhapadmādviniḥsrtā// *Mahābhārata*, 6.43.1
- ⁱⁱ ahimsā paramo dharmastathā'hiṁsā paro damaḥ/
ahimsā paramaṁ dānamahimsā paramaṁ tapaḥ// *Ibid.*, 13.116.28
- ⁱⁱⁱ satyena labhyastapasā hyeṣa ātmā
samyagjñānena brahmacaryeṇa nityam/
antaḥśarīre jyotirmayo hi śubhro
yaṁ paśyanti yatayaḥ kṣīṇadoṣāṁ// *Muṇḍakopaniṣad*, 3.1.5
- ^{iv} satyameva jayate...// *Ibid.*, 3.1.6
- ^v Jadunath Sinha, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 2 pp. 247, 319
- ^{vi} yamaniyamāsanaprāṇāyāmapratyāhāradhāraṇādhyānasamādhayo'stāvaṅgāni;
tatrāhiṁsāsatyāsteyabrahmacaryāparigrahā yamāḥ; śaucasantoṣatapaḥsvādhyāyeśvarapraṇidhānāni niyamāḥ.
Yogasūtra, 2.29
- ^{vii} buddhirjñānamasammohaḥ kṣamā satyaṁ damaḥ śamaḥ/
sukhaṁ duḥkhaṁ bhavo'bhāvo bhayaṁ cābhayaṁ eva ca//
ahimsā samatā tuṣṭitapo dānaṁ yaśo'ayaśaḥ/
bhavanti bhāvā bhūtānāṁ matta eva pṛthagvidhāḥ// *Gita*, 10.4-5
- ^{viii} ...ahimsā satyam...bhavanti sampadaṁ daivīmabhiḥjātasya bhārata// *Ibid.*, 16.1-3
- ^{ix} ...duḥkhālayamaśāśvatam...; anityamasukhaṁ lokamimaṁ prāpya bhajasva mām// *Ibid.*, 8.15; 9.33
- ^x Vide., *Gita*, p. 446
- ^{xi} Dev Raj Bali, *Modern Indian Thought*, pp.118-119
- ^{xii}āśid ekamevādvitīyaṁ / *Chāndogyopaniṣad*, 6.2.2
- ^{xiii} sadbhāve sādhubhāve ca sādityetaprayujyate/
praśaste karmaṇi tathā sacchabdaḥ pārtha yujyate//
yajñe tapasi dāne ca sthitiḥ saditi cocyate/
karma caiva tadarthīyaṁ sādityevābhidhīyate// *Gita*, 17.26-27
- ^{xiv} Mahatma Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, p. 13

- ^{xv} mām hi pārtha vyapāśritya ye’pi syuḥ pāpayonayah/
striyo vaiśyāstathā śuddhāste’pi yānti parām gatim// *Gita*, 9.32
- ^{xvi} Mahatma Gandhi, *The Bhagavad Gita*, p.64
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p.2
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, p.7
- ^{xx} Mahatma Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, p.193
- ^{xxi} Cf., *Ibid.*, p.191
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, pp.194-195
- ^{xxiii} Mahatma Gandhi, *The Bhagavad Gita*, p.4
- ^{xxiv} Cf., *Ibid.*